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## UNITED KINGDOM

# Access to Britain's top universities is far from fair

Vikki Boliver

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Research suggests that access to the United Kingdom's top universities is far from fair for students from state schools and ethnic minorities, even when the figures are screened for subjects studied at A-level. Despite the establishment of a government Office for Fair Access nearly a decade ago, students from less privileged backgrounds continue to be substantially underrepresented in the United Kingdom's more prestigious universities.

More than 90% of school children are educated in state-maintained schools in the UK, and yet state school students make up less than 80% of all UK-domiciled undergraduates at Russell Group universities and just 60% of those at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.

And while students from black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds make up 10% of university entrants nationally, they account for just 4% of those entering Russell Group universities and less than 2% of those entering Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.

Given these figures, to what extent can access to prestigious UK universities be said to be fair? One way of measuring the extent of fair access is to consider whether prospective students who are equally well qualified to enter more prestigious universities are equally likely to apply and be admitted to these institutions regardless of their social background, where 'equally well qualified' is taken to mean simply having achieved the same grades at A-level.

Of course, this is a somewhat conservative definition of what it means to be equally well qualified.

Three A grades achieved by a student from an average state school may be considered a more impressive feat than the same performance by a student from a high-performing private school, and certainly state school students have been shown to go on to achieve higher marks at degree level than their privately educated peers who entered university with the same prior attainment.

Because of this, it is becoming increasingly accepted that A-level grades need to be calibrated using information about the social context of that attainment.

But sticking with the more conservative definition of equally well qualified, can access to more prestigious UK universities be said to be fair in this sense?

According to research due to be published in the *British Journal of Sociology* in June, the answer is a resounding no.

## Application

The research involved an analysis of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, or UCAS, data for around 49,000 university applicants over the period 1996-2006, and has since been replicated for a further 76,000 university applicants over the period 2010-12.

Both the original study and its update found that, compared to private school applicants with the

same grades at A-level, state school applicants were less likely to seek places at Russell Group universities in the first place, and when they did apply to Russell Group universities they were less likely to be offered places.

In contrast, ethnic background seemed not to be a factor, in the sense that university applicants with the same grades at A-level were found to be equally likely to apply to Russell Group universities irrespective of ethnic background.

However, applicants from black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds were shown to be substantially less likely than their white counterparts to be offered places at Russell Group universities even when they had achieved the same A-level grades.

What these research findings make clear is that it is not enough to cast the challenges to fair access as being solely about barriers to university application. On the contrary, we need to pay at least as much attention to admissions policies and practices that evidently disadvantage applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.

## **Subjects**

Commenting on the findings of this research last month, the Russell Group blamed the admissions disadvantage described in the study on state school and ethnic minority applicants' "poor A-level [subject] choices, which lead them to fail to meet entry requirements", and on applicants from these groups being "more likely to apply for the most over-subscribed [degree] courses".

These might be powerful criticisms of the research if it wasn't for the fact that the analysis did include statistical controls for whether or not applicants had studied any of the eight subjects identified by the Russell Group as generally facilitating access to courses at their institutions – specifically biology, chemistry, English literature, geography, history, languages, maths and physics – as well as for which degree subject area applicants were seeking to enter (17 categories including medicine and dentistry, subjects allied to medicine, and so on).

True, it would have been preferable to control for the specific degree programmes applicants had applied to, and for whether applicants' A-level subjects matched the entry requirements of their chosen programmes. However, the lack of availability of sufficiently detailed data meant that such a fine-grained analysis was not possible.

A further complication is that the study was only able to look at the actual grades applicants achieved in their A-levels whereas, in practice, admissions selectors often base their decisions on applicants' predicted rather than actual A-level grades and perhaps also their performance at GCSE.

Again, because of the lack of availability of data on UCAS applicants' predicted A-level grades and GCSE grades, it was not possible to examine how these factors affect admissions chances.

However, if predicted A-level grades and-or GCSE grades could be shown to explain away school type and ethnic origin disparities in offer rates, this would not be the end of the story.

Predicted A-level grades are notoriously unreliable – around half of all predictions are wrong – and there are good reasons to suspect that predicted grades are especially unreliable for

applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.

It would hardly seem fair if disparities in offer rates for applicants with the same actual attainment at A-level were found to be due to differing grade predictions. Nor would it seem fair if unequal offer rates were found to be attributable to GCSE performance – do we really want university admissions chances to be largely fixed by age 16?

### **Personal statements**

Admissions selectors may also take into account applicants' personal statements, teachers' references and, for certain courses, performance in face-to-face interviews.

All three of these more subjective selection tools almost inevitably favour applicants from more socially advantaged backgrounds.

Applicants from schools and families that are better resourced financially, and that are more experienced and more confident in navigating the university admissions process, can bank on a good deal of help with crafting their personal statements, on the strongest possible reference, and on a more polished self-presentation at interview.

If personal statements, references and interviews are going to form part of a fair admissions system, then clearly they need to be evaluated contextually too. Currently access to prestigious UK universities would appear to be far from fair.

Should we be surprised? Perhaps not. Should we be concerned? Very much so.

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